



# Acquaintance and the sublime: an alternative account of theistic sublime experience

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**Abstract** In this paper I argue that when one has an epiphany of the form ‘God is F’ (e.g., ‘God is wise’) upon having a sublime experience one can be accurately described as being acquainted with the fact that God is F as opposed to inferring that God is F from the experience at hand. To argue for this, I will, first, outline what a sublime experience is, in general, before outlining what a theistic sublime experience is in particular. Second, I will outline two ways of understanding theistic sublime experiences. First, I will outline a model that I will call the ‘inference model’ which, put simply, says that when one has an epiphany of the form ‘God is F’, upon having a theistic sublime experience, one is drawing this conclusion via a process of ‘inference-to-the-best-explanation’ (Chignell and Halteman in: Costelloe (ed) *The sublime: From antiquity to the present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, p. 426). Second, I will outline an alternative model that I call the ‘acquaintance model’ which, put simply, says that no inferential process occurs when one has an epiphany of the form ‘God is F’ upon having a theistic sublime experience, but one is made directly aware of the fact that God is F. Third, and finally, I will respond to some objections to the acquaintance model.

**Keywords** Sublime · Acquaintance · Religious experience · Theistic perception · Non-inferential perceptual belief

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All Biblical references taken from: The Holy Bible: New International Version. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979.

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## Introduction

It was commonplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for philosophers, and writers on the sublime more generally, to hold that sublime experiences led one to an idea of God. Joseph Addison, for example, writes about how the ocean ‘naturally raises in my thoughts the idea of an almighty being, and conceives of his existence, as much as any metaphysical demonstration’ (Addison 1712). Thomas Gray also notes ‘not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry...scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument’ (Gray 1736, p. 128). These claims, so it seems, are claims to the effect that a sublime experience gives one, in some sense to be discussed, a direct awareness of God.

In recent years, however, the belief that a sublime experience can give one a direct awareness of God has been neglected.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, recently Andrew Chignell and Matthew Halteman (2012) have given an account of theistic sublime experiences that describes them as cases of ‘inference-to-the-best-explanation’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 426). In this paper I will argue that while Chignell and Halteman’s model may be plausible there is another model that can be put forward that is consistent with one’s being acquainted with facts about God upon having a sublime experience. The reason why I am arguing this is twofold. First, because I think that the nature of a theistic sublime experience is such that it lends itself to being explained in terms of acquaintance, rather than in terms of inference. Second, if I can offer a plausible account of acquaintance with God through a sublime experience, and knowledge gained by acquaintance counts as *prima facie* justified, then we can say that one can be *prima facie* justified in believing facts about God upon having a sublime experience.

I shall carry out this project as follows. First, I will outline what a sublime experience is and then place it into a category of religious experience (when the sublime experience is purported to be theistic). Second, I will show how a theistic sublime experience can be explained in terms of acquaintance, rather than inference. Third, I will consider some objections to my model.

## Preliminaries

### Sublime experience

I take the sublime to be an aesthetic category that denotes a particular type of experience.<sup>2</sup> An experience that, in the popular vernacular, can be described as ‘awesome’ or ‘breath-taking.’ Philosophical accounts of sublime experiences,

<sup>1</sup> I will not discuss the reasons why here. This has been well done by Kirwan (2005).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth making clear that by ‘sublime experience’ I do not mean one single experience with particular phenomenal content (such as a flash of yellow, or twinge of pain), but, as will be demonstrated, a complex experience, with several different parts, and which typically unfolds over an interval of time.

however, are typically more nuanced than this and commonly involve two aspects.<sup>3</sup> Below I will attempt to outline the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that constitute a sublime experience.

### *The negative aspect*

We can delineate two aspects of a sublime experience by describing the phenomenology involved. First, a sublime experience is negative. Authors have described the feelings involved with this aspect using words such as ‘cognitive outstripping,’ ‘bedazzlement’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 412) ‘vulnerability,’ or ‘insignificance’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 130). On Immanuel Kant’s influential account of the sublime, for example, he writes that when having a sublime experience we feel an ‘inability on the part of our faculty for the estimation of the magnitude [the measure] of things of the world of the senses’ (Kant 2008, p. 81). In other words, when having a sublime experience, we have a strong feeling that we do not comprehend the extreme size of the object of our experience and we find it difficult to imagine how we could comprehend it. On Kant’s account it is this disabling experience that one finds displeasing and negative. It does not seem necessary, however, that one feel that one’s cognitive powers have been surpassed in order for these negative feelings to occur. The negative feelings involved might simply be such feelings as vulnerability, powerlessness, or insignificance. For example, it seems that one can stand before a violent storm and feel vulnerable. In this case one does not experience a cognitive failure or ‘inability,’ rather one might simply feel vulnerable before, or weak in comparison to, the powerful and strong storm. All that seems necessary then is that one’s experience evokes the awareness of one’s limits. This may come by way of a certain cognitive inability or by way of simply feeling vulnerable or insignificant etc.

Moreover, Kant refers to this negative aspect of the sublime as the aspect at which a sense of being scared or terrified (cf. Kant 2008, p. 91) before the object of our experience occurs. One might disagree, however, and argue that the feeling involved is, again, better understood simply as an awareness of one’s limits. This is primarily because there seem to be sublime experiences where there is no feeling of being scared involved per se. For example, when one stands under a vast and starry sky one may look up at the sky and feel that one’s cognitive powers are surpassed as one tries to comprehend the size of the universe containing all the stars. In this case it is not obvious that one is experiencing a feeling of being scared. Rather, one is feeling that the object of one’s experience is much greater than one is, which makes one realize how ‘physically insignificant, or utterly contingent [one is] in comparison to the object’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 130). In this case, and others, one might be described as having negative feelings brought on by the object of one’s

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<sup>3</sup> Although these aspects may occur in temporal succession they need not. Thanks to David E. Schrader for bringing this to my attention. For the sake of clarity, I will continue to refer to these aspects as though they occur one after the other.

perception but not necessarily experiencing the feeling of being scarred. For example, one might simply feel small relative to the vast expanse before one.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, one might also notice that the negative feelings involved in a sublime experience are evoked by objects with ‘extreme properties’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 126) that are ‘suited to arouse intense perceptual experiences’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 120). Cochrane suggests that properties such as ‘darkness, or bright, fiery colours; very rough or sharp surfaces as well as those that are utterly flat; also (relative) extremes of silence and noise, heat and cold, stillness and movement, complexity and simplicity’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 120) might also evoke a sublime experience. Objects that exemplify these extreme properties (like expansive cliffs, storm clouds, lightning and thunder, volcanoes, hurricanes, oceans, expansive deserts, or tall waterfalls) therefore might evoke a sublime experience. For example, a desert might evoke a sublime experience because of its vast size, whereas a volcano might evoke a sublime experience because of its intense heat. Thus, it also seems necessary that, for a sublime experience to occur, there is an object of one’s attention with certain extreme properties.

### *The positive aspect*

Besides this negative aspect of the sublime experience one is in fact said to take ‘pleasure’ (Kant 2008, p. 88) from the experience or be ‘attracted’ to the object of experience (Cochrane 2012, p. 127). This signifies a change from the first aspect to the second aspect of a sublime experience. Much debate is had surrounding this aspect of the sublime. This is primarily because various philosophers have proposed different explanations as to why one feels pleasure or attraction when the first aspect is so negative. Kant, for example, held that the feeling of pleasure involved in a sublime experience was due to the fact that, although our imaginative powers or ‘sensible faculties’ have been surpassed, our rational faculty overcomes this and “‘makes sensible” the supersensible aspects of our nature, and thus makes “real” for us the fact that we can and do set ends for ourselves beyond our sensible abilities’ (Zuckert 2003, p. 218). In other words, one’s own rational thought overcomes the initial cognitive outstripping. For Kant one can experience one’s rational faculty overcoming this initial cognitive outstripping in two ways. First, one may experience the feeling of one’s rational thought as superior to ‘the natural capacity required for sensory apprehension’ (Ginsborg 2014). Take, for example, the Cliffs of Dover. At first one may feel that one’s cognitive powers are outstripped as one tries to comprehend the size of the cliffs. According to Kant, however, this cognitive outstripping may awaken the feeling of a supersensible faculty within one that strives for comprehension (cf. Kant 2008, p. 81). It is this awakening that one may find pleasurable. Kant calls sublime experiences of this kind ‘mathematically sublime.’

Second, we may experience the feeling of our own rational thought overcoming an initial cognitive outstripping when we realize that nature is ‘a power that has no

<sup>4</sup> To be clear I do not think that I have refuted Kant. Rather, I am simply stating my opinion with regard to the wider debate.

dominion over us' (Kant 2008, p. 90). Take, for example, the experience of a violent storm. I may observe a violent storm from the comfort of my home. In this case I may experience fear while at the same time know that I am safe. In this case we, according to Kant, find that 'the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of judging ourselves as independent of nature' (Kant 2008, p. 92). In short, a faculty is revealed to us that allows us to judge that we are independent of nature and that nature has no dominion over us. It is this realization that, according to Kant, we find pleasurable. Kant calls sublime experiences of this kind 'dynamically sublime.'

There are thinkers, however, that have less egoistic accounts of the sublime. Herder, for example, claims that this pleasure comes from an 'awe in the beauty of heavenly order' (Zuckert 2003, p. 220) that leads to the admiration of 'the world as ordered by God' (Zuckert 2003, p. 226). Herder's account holds that the pleasure is caused by our recognition of order; while Kant's account holds that pleasure is taken from our recognition that our rational faculty overcomes our initial cognitive failure. It will become apparent that I agree with Herder's non-egoistic account of a sublime experience and disagree with Kant's as this paper progresses. Put simply, however, I prefer Herder's account to Kant's because, although the object of our experience isn't itself 'sublime' a sublime experience seems to be object-focused and not self-focused. That is, it is the mountain or desert that we find enthralling. Whatever one thinks is the right explanation of the feeling of pleasure within a sublime experience, however, it seems that the feeling of pleasure or attraction is necessary to say that one is having a sublime experience.

While I favour a non-egoistic account of the sublime this is not to say that the distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime needs to be wholly rejected. While I think that Kant was incorrect to equate the feeling of pleasure had during a sublime experience with a feeling of one's own rational faculty overcoming a cognitive outstripping, the distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime is still helpful. It seems correct to say, for example, that the negative aspect of sublime experiences can be brought about in two ways. Each way distinctive of either the mathematical or the dynamical sublime. First, a sublime experience can be brought about by one's powers of comprehension being frustrated (distinctive of the mathematical sublime). Second, a sublime experience can be brought about by one's feeling vulnerable before nature (distinctive of the dynamical sublime). I should add here that there seems to be no *prima facie* reason why theistic sublime experiences (to be discussed) cannot occur during sublime experiences brought about in both ways.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There may be an interesting relationship between mathematical sublime experiences, dynamical sublime experiences and theistic sublime experiences. Perhaps, for example, one kind of theistic epiphanic belief content is more common during one's having a sublime experience brought about by one's cognitive powers being frustrated, that is not brought about by one's feeling vulnerable before a storm (and vice versa). For example, perhaps the epiphanic belief content 'God is wise' occurs more often upon some subject's having a 'mathematical' sublime experience than a 'dynamic' sublime experience. At the moment this is mere speculation and unfortunately addressing the relationship between the mathematical sublime, the dynamical sublime and theistic sublime experiences further than this would take me too far away from the primary aim of this paper.

Finally, one will also notice that one can feel pleasure because one realizes something or has an ‘epiphany.’ For Kant the feeling of pleasure is present in a sublime experience because one realizes the superiority of one’s mind to natural phenomena, whereas, for Herder, the pleasure involved in the sublime experience comes from the realisation of ‘the world as ordered by God’ and the ‘beauty of the heavenly order’ (Zuckert 2003, p. 220). Pleasure might occur, then, because one has an epiphany (although epiphany is perhaps not necessary for a sublime experience in general, it can occur). I will characterize an epiphany, with Chignell and Halteman, as the point ‘at which the subject’s affections or beliefs are changed, existing states are in some way strengthened, or familiar commitments are transformed’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 412).<sup>6</sup> In consequence, a conversion, corroboration or transformation of one’s beliefs will occur. I will refer to the experience of having one’s belief converted, corroborated, or transformed as the ‘epiphanic effects’ of the sublime experience. For example, one may have an epiphany that causes one to believe one is insignificant relative to the size of the universe. This may be a new belief in which case it is a *conversion*. That is, the subject of the sublime experience once thought that she was a significant feature of the universe but she now thinks that she is insignificant. On the other hand, this may be a belief that has been confirmed by the experience. In this case the epiphany would be *corroborative*. Third, this epiphany may give the subject a new perspective on their insignificance. That is, the subject might come to believe that she is insignificant by comparison to the size of the universe where previously she merely thought she was insignificant for other reasons. In which case the epiphany would *transform* her belief.

To be clear sublime experiences as I have portrayed them consist, primarily,<sup>7</sup> of two types of mental content. First, sublime experiences in general are paradigmatically phenomenal, therefore, a sublime experience has phenomenal content. This is simply the content conveyed to the subject by her perceptual experience. In this case the phenomenal content involved consists, first and foremost, of the extreme properties of the object followed by the feeling of vulnerability or having the feeling of having one’s cognitive powers surpassed etc. Second, while the first aspect involves only phenomenal content, the second aspect might involve both phenomenal content and belief (propositional) content. Epiphanies, for example, involve a belief. In consequence, we can talk about ‘epiphanic belief content.’ The sublime experience discussed above, for example, might involve the epiphanic belief content ‘the night sky is ordered and beautiful.’ Moreover, there is a feeling of having an epiphany such that there is a mental state of *what it is like* to undergo an epiphany. In consequence, the epiphany itself also contains phenomenal content. Thus, in general, I use the phrase ‘epiphanic effects’ to refer to the proposition and to the phenomenology involved when one has an epiphany during a sublime experience.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper I remain neutral as to whether epiphanies are a part of the positive aspect or a part of some further third aspect. I suspect that they could be a part of the second aspect but that they are not a necessary part of the second aspect.

<sup>7</sup> There are likely more types of mental content involved, for example, cognitive feelings.

In sum, to have a sublime experience it seems necessary that (i) one feels a sense of the awareness of one's limits (ii) one feels pleasure or attraction. It also seems necessary that (iii) there is an object present with certain 'extreme properties.' None of these necessary conditions alone, however, seems sufficient. For example, one can take pleasure in observing a waterfall but this does not mean that one is having a sublime experience. One must also have a feeling of, for example, one's vulnerability before the waterfall. Thus, these conditions are individually necessary but only jointly sufficient for a sublime experience. Epiphanies, while they do not seem necessary for sublime experiences in general, do occur during some sublime experiences. Epiphanies do, however, seem necessary for one to have *theistic* sublime experiences.

### *Theistic sublime experience*

There are cases where the epiphanic belief content of a sublime experience involves the conversion, corroboration, or transformation of a *religious* belief; call these experiences religious sublime experiences. In particular, however, there are also cases where the epiphanic belief content of a sublime experience involves the conversion, corroboration, or transformation of a specifically *theistic* religious belief. Take, the example that Chignell and Halteman cite of the Roman centurion. The Roman centurion present at the crucifixion of Jesus was converted upon having a sublime experience. According to the gospel narratives, after he experienced the sublime darkness and the earthquake that occurred at Jesus' death he was 'terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"' (Matt. 27:54). Assuming the centurion felt pleasure after his initial terror we can say that the centurion had a conversational theistic sublime experience.

For the majority of this paper I will be primarily concerned with this type of sublime experience. To be clear I am using the phrase 'theistic sublime experience,' to denote a sublime experience where the epiphanic belief content of that experience includes some *theistic* religious belief. Before I offer two accounts of theistic sublime experiences, however, I must first introduce what type of religious experience theistic sublime experiences are purported to be (this will be expanded upon later in this paper).

### **Religious experience**

'Religious experience' in the broadest possible sense includes any experience that, for the subject, has religious connotations or, as Alston notes, "religious experience" ranges over any experiences one has in connection with one's religious life, including any joys, fears, or longings one has in a religious context' (Alston 1991, p. 34). As previously noted, however, for the purposes of this paper my usage of the phrase will be much narrower: I am only concerned with religious experiences with distinctly theistic content. We can define a theistic religious experience as follows:

**Theistic religious experience** = an experience in which it seems to the subject that God (i) appears or (ii) presents himself as so-and-so. (Where so-and-so includes, but is not limited to, the traditional divine attributes).<sup>8</sup>

I will briefly consider each of the above clauses. On the one hand, a theistic religious experience can be an experience in which God appears to a conscious subject. Perception of God may be counted as a theistic religious experience of this kind. For example, take the case of Moses at the cleft in the rock on Mount Sinai. Here Moses sees God's back (presumably in incarnate form) after he has passed Moses by. I will follow Robert Audi (2011) in calling this experience a case of *simple theistic perception*. For this is a case where God is perceived as straightforwardly as I can perceive the table in front of me.

On the other hand, a theistic religious experience can be an experience in which a conscious subject perceives an object through which God 'presents himself.' For instance, we might talk of seeing (or sensing) God through nature. In these cases, a perception of God is mediated by what is ordinarily seen. As Audi notes, '[t]he experience would be based on the phenomenal elements in the ordinary seeing (or otherwise sensing something in the natural world), but would have a religiously phenomenal element. Here, the experience of a dynamic scene seems especially appropriate as a source of examples' (Audi 2011, p. 117). For example, one might be seeing huge swelling waves rising up. For some these experiences might arouse a sense of God's control over nature. Again I will follow Audi in calling this *mediated theistic perception*.<sup>9</sup>

One might wonder what kind of *perception* mediated theistic perception is. It certainly seems plausible that one might *infer*, but not *perceive*, properties of God through a sublime experience. For example, one might infer that God is very powerful when one experiences a powerful storm for, provided that one has the relevant background beliefs, one might think that God is more powerful than the storm and the storm itself appears to be powerful. Mediated theistic perception, on the other hand, refers to an ordinary sense of seeing (seeing something in the natural world) that results in the subject forming a theistic belief such as the belief that God is wise. What this perception involves more precisely will be developed later in this paper.

For the time being I think I have said enough to show that one should characterize cases of theistic sublime experience as cases of mediated theistic perception rather than simple theistic perception (if one is going to class theistic sublime experiences as perceptual experiences at all).<sup>10</sup> This is for two reasons. First, when one has a sublime experience the *object* of the sublime experience is a feature of the natural world e.g., rocks, mountains, volcanoes, oceans. Second, the epiphanic belief content will involve an expression of God's properties. For instance, when one undergoes a theistic sublime experience one is typically taken to

<sup>8</sup> I borrow this characterization from William Alston (see Alston 1991, p. 34).

<sup>9</sup> I should make it clear at this point that I do not intend my treatment of theistic sublime experiences to be understood as a treatment of mystical religious experience. One's mystical experience may be sublime but, at least in this paper, I do not take sublime experiences to be mystical.

<sup>10</sup> At least this side of death.



perceive the fact that God is powerful rather than perceive God himself (simple theistic perception). If simple theistic perception were occurring during a sublime experience, given that the object of a sublime experience is a natural object, one might exclaim, ‘God is a volcano.’ This does not typically occur during a theistic sublime experience.

## Models of theistic sublime experiences

So far I have classified a theistic sublime experience as an instance of mediated theistic perception. This is a form of perception that leads one to believe in, change one’s existing beliefs, or confirm one’s beliefs about, God by perceiving him *through* something else, e.g., nature. In this section I will argue that, although the perception occurring is mediated we can understand theistic sublime experiences in terms of acquaintance rather than inference-to-the-best-explanation. I will argue for this conclusion by, first, outlining the inferential model of understanding the theistic sublime suggested by Chignell and Halteman (2012) before, second, showing that theistic sublime experiences can also be described as a form of acquaintance with facts about God.

### The inference model

Chignell and Halteman suggest that the epiphanic belief content of all three types of theistic sublime experiences (conversional, corroborative and transformational) may be the result of inference. First, they note that in the case of *conversional* theistic sublime experiences, some ‘sort of inference-to-the-best-explanation’ may be at work (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 426). Take again, for example, the epiphanic belief content ‘Surely he is the Son of God’ had by the centurion soldier present at Jesus’ death. Chignell and Halteman argue that this ‘looks like an *inference* from the occurrence of these events to the veracity (and innocence) of the man he had executed’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 426). I understand Chignell and Halteman to be saying that, perhaps, the Roman centurion saw the sky rapidly darken and experienced the earthquake and, perhaps, given the first-century connotations of these phenomena being linked with divine forces, and given that he was aware of the rumors that this man was the son of God, he would have reasoned that the man he crucified was, in fact, the son of God. In this case the subject of the experience actively infers the conclusion from the experience at hand given some other background belief or beliefs.

Second, although not explicitly stated, we might also understand Chignell and Halteman to take corroborative theistic sublime experiences to involve inference too. With regards to the corroborative theistic sublime Chignell and Halteman comment that ‘what happens is presumably more of a “reading into” than a “reading off”: background beliefs are involved’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 429). Again, in this case, the subject of the experience already has one or more background beliefs, when having a sublime experience, that are used by the subject to ‘read into’ the sublime experience as corroborating or raising the subject’s

‘credence levels’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 427) in those beliefs. This process of interpretation or ‘reading into’ on behalf of the subject seems to be inferential. The subject reasons from the experience at hand that some preexisting belief should be held with greater credence.

Finally, Chignell and Halteman suggest that what might be occurring during a transformative theistic sublime experience is, again, an inference. They write that the subject ‘infers a substantive and broadly religious conclusion simply from the reflective awareness of having *had* such an experience’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 423). It seems to me that what Chignell and Halteman mean here is that since the subject had such a ‘category-busting’ (Chignell and Halteman 2012, p. 430) experience the inference doesn’t happen quickly (as it did, for example, in the case of the Roman centurion); rather, she interprets the sublime experience, in and of itself, to have some sort of significance for her religious beliefs after the experience has happened. One might think that this epiphany is not a part of the sublime experience itself since it happens after the initial phenomenology involved in a sublime experience has elapsed. As noted above I remain neutral on this point but, to be clear, Chignell and Halteman suggest that sublime experiences do, in fact, have three aspects<sup>11</sup> and, in this case, the third aspect might occur after a significant period of time has elapsed.

According to Chignell and Halteman, all forms of theistic sublime experience can, it seems, be described in terms of inference. It is my suspicion that others besides Chignell and Halteman also think that the epiphanic belief content had upon a theistic sublime experience is the result of an inference-to-the-best-explanation. Below I will offer an alternative model that does not explain theistic sublime experience in terms of inference. I call this model ‘the acquaintance model.’ Before I explain and defend the acquaintance model, however, I must first describe what I understand acquaintance to be.

## Acquaintance

Acquaintance is a fundamentally *sui generis* relation that holds between a conscious being and different kinds of objects, properties, or facts. Since acquaintance is *sui generis* an explanation of such a relation is difficult. Thus, I will not give an exhaustive account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for acquaintance. Instead I will give an example of acquaintance and extract what seem to be the two most important, and perhaps necessary, features of acquaintance.

First, consider the book before me on my desk. This book imposes itself upon me in perception. It is there before me. I do not infer from anything that there is a book before me; rather, it is simply given to me in experience ‘the fact is there before consciousness’ (Fumerton 2001, p. 41). It is cases like this that I am referring to when I talk about acquaintance. The first important feature of acquaintance then is that it is a relationship between a conscious subject and an object, property, or fact.

<sup>11</sup> They refer to these ‘aspects’ as ‘stages,’ however. I use the term ‘aspect’ rather than ‘stage’ so as to avoid making temporal succession an implicit necessary condition for one’s having a sublime experience.

In this case, as Richard Fumerton notes, it is between a subject and a fact: the fact that there is a book there before me.

Second, to borrow from Bertrand Russell,<sup>12</sup> ‘we shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths’ (Russell 1959, p. 25). In other words, the relationship between conscious subject and object does not involve any inference but is given immediately. For example, when I come home and walk in through my front door I can see my wife’s keys on the chest in the hallway. Upon seeing her keys, I reason that since she drives home from work, since her day at work has finished, and since when she gets home from work she places her keys on the chest, she must therefore be at home. This is a case of inference. I see some keys on the chest and reason from this that my wife is at home. For some subject *S* to be acquainted with *x*, however, is for *S* to know *x* but without any inferential cognitive process occurring. For clarity I will characterize acquaintance as follows:

**Acquaintance** = *S* is acquainted with *x* where *x* (a) is an object, property, or fact and (b) is not inferred but given to the subject in experience.

So far I have only given an example of acquaintance with a fact (and ignored properties or objects). This will suffice for my purposes because I am only interested in acquaintance with facts. The fact I have used to explain acquaintance, however, is a fact about an object (a book) and not an agent. Consequently, for the purpose of this paper I need to explain further two things: first, since God is an agent, acquaintance with facts about agents and, second, since theistic sublime experiences are a form of mediated theistic perception and not simple theistic perception, acquaintance with facts about agents that are mediated.

To explain acquaintance with facts about agents I will borrow and adapt an example from Goldie (2007).

Consider Mary and her friends. Mary is celebrating with some friends in a local restaurant. Since she is at the centre of attention Mary is enjoying being teased by her friends. After a comment from one friend, however, Mary finds that the teasing starts to get a bit too much. We might describe Mary as ‘holding back the tears.’ Jack, then, joins the table having been at the bar. Jack sits down and instantly recognizes that Mary is getting upset and he changes the subject to ease Mary’s distress. This is successful and Mary recomposes herself just before any of her other friends notice.

Goldie calls this a case of ‘non-inferential perceptual belief’ (Goldie 2007, p. 348). A non-inferential perceptual belief is

- (i) a belief that an object or agent has a certain property, where this belief is arrived at via sense modality and,
- (ii) this belief occurs/arises in a phenomenologically immediate way and is not the product of a conscious process of inference. Or as Millar put is, ‘it is

<sup>12</sup> I must note here that I do not want to align my position here with that of Russell’s more specific philosophical views attached to his notion of acquaintance e.g., that the only objects of my perception are sense-data.

phenomenologically immediate, in the sense that it is not acquired via inference from prior assumptions' (Millar 2000, p. 73).

Jack, for example, believes that Mary has the property of 'being upset' because Jack can *see* Mary's face (i). Moreover, Jack realizes this immediately (ii). In other words, Jack arrived at his belief 'without reasoning on the subject's part' (Millar 2000, p. 74). It is true that if we were to ask Jack why he thought that Mary was upset he might appeal to the way Mary looked e.g., her bottom lip was wobbling and her eyes were welling up. That is, he would have recourse to an inferential description. His initial judgment, however, was made without an inferential reasoning process occurring. Non-inferential perceptual belief is consistent with acquaintance (characterized above) in at least the following respect: Jack does not engage in any cognitive process of inference or reasoning (satisfying (b)). What remains for me to demonstrate, however, is that non-inferential perceptual belief can include perception of facts. That is, to show that Jack *sees* that *Mary is upset* (satisfying (a)). I will again follow Goldie's lead. Goldie argues that now we have a definition of non-inferential perceptual belief in place we can say what is needed for non-inferential perceptual belief. Goldie gives the following two conditions:

- (iii) First,...the world must be a certain way; to make perceptual judgment that something is an F from the way that it appears, relative to some sense, then things 'must have an appearance relative to that sense which is (nearly enough) *distinctive* of Fs...' (Millar 2000, p. 87).
- (iv) 'Secondly, the person must be a certain way; he or she must have a disposition reliably to respond differentially' to things that are F from the way they appear; and he or she must have 'the capacity to produce conceptually articulated responses' (Brandom 2002, p. 96).

Goldie argues that if the two above conditions, (iii) and (iv), for non-inferential perceptual belief are not merely necessary but jointly sufficient then 'it follows that there is no a priori principled limit to what can be non-inferentially perceived' and, as a result, non-inferential perception 'can be extended to include perception of facts' (Goldie 2007, p. 350).

In this particular instance (that is, with regards to the Jack and Mary case) the following two conditions have to be met. With regards to (iii) the world must be such that facial expressions reveal human emotions (most would understand this to be uncontroversial). Moreover, Mary's being upset and about to cry must have an appearance that is (nearly enough) distinctive of someone being in the emotional state 'upset' and 'that this situation has an appearance which is (nearly enough) distinctive of situations which call for the specified action' (Goldie 2007, p. 350). We might think that Mary, for example, must be closer to a wince than to a smile.

With regards to (iv) Goldie argues that Jack must have the 'disposition reliably to recognize and respond to such facts in a conceptually articulated manner' (Goldie 2007, p. 350). That is, Jack must be disposed to recognize when someone is upset and this disposition must be reliable. Perhaps Jack, for example, can point to his successful track record of perceiving when people are upset. If these two conditions

((iii) and (iv)) are met and one agrees that non-inferential perceptual belief occurs then we can say that, the *fact* that *Mary is upset* was ‘phenomenologically immediate’ (Goldie 2007, p. 348) to Jack thus satisfying (a) and (b) of acquaintance.

One may notice, however, that the fact that *Mary is upset* still involved a direct and unmediated perception of the agent in question: Mary. That is, although Jack’s perception of the fact that *Mary is upset* is, in some sense, mediated (i.e. he didn’t see the upsetness) Jack still perceived Mary simply i.e., he saw Mary’s face. This, however, is not the case with theistic sublime experiences; one does not perceive God simply. Thus, I need to extend perception of facts about agents to involve cases where the agent is not directly present.

Consider, for example, someone perceiving the fact that someone else is distressed upon viewing his or her handwriting. There is a distressed writer  $S_1$  who writes, for example, a shopping list. Upon perceiving the handwriting a subject  $S_2$  realizes that the writer,  $S_1$ , was distressed. The perceiver of the distress might non-inferentially perceive the fact that ‘ $S_1$  is distressed’, however, this non-inferential perception comes by way of seeing the writer’s handwriting and not by seeing the writer herself.<sup>13</sup>

### The acquaintance model

This non-inferential perception, I’m suggesting, can occur upon one’s having a theistic sublime experience. One might perceive the fact that God is wise upon perceiving a natural object or event. Upon a sublime experience the subject  $S_1$  realizes that God,  $S_2$ , is wise upon perceiving an object  $O$ , e.g. a cliff-face, waterfall or desert.

So far I have only attempted to demonstrate that (i) and (ii) are satisfied on a theistic sublime experience and have assumed that (iii) and (iv) are also satisfied. That is, I have assumed, first, that sublime experiences are such that they allow one to make the perceptual judgment that God is  $F$  from the way that it appears. Second, I have assumed that the person involved does have a ‘disposition reliably to respond’ to sublime experiences such that this person is able to perceive God; like it might require that someone be a skilled graphologist to perceive that a subject is distressed by looking at his or her handwriting.

Below I will consider objections to my model that argue that (iii) and (iv) are not satisfied by theistic sublime experiences. Before I do, however, I want to apply the above discussion to three cases of theistic sublime experience and demonstrate that all of these experiences can be accurately described as cases of acquaintance with facts about God.

Consider the following claims:

<sup>13</sup> I use this example because of its intuitive nature. It’s been pointed out to me, however, that since graphology is controversial perhaps I should offer a further example. I borrow another example from Dretske (1969) quoted by Millar (2000). Millar writes, ‘Dretske suggested that there is a sense of ‘seeing that’ on which a traffic officer may see that a driver was exceeding the speed limit by seeing that tyre marks, produced by sudden breaking action, are of a certain length’ (Millar 2000, p. 73). In this case there is a driver,  $S_1$ , who leaves tyre marks,  $O$ . The traffic officer,  $S_2$ , then realizes (sees that) that the driver,  $S_1$ , was speeding. This is a fact about an agent that the perceiver sees via an intermediary.

“wildness” raises our thoughts “in admiration of divine wisdom.” Shaftesbury paraphrased by Kirwan (Kirwan 2005, p. 27).

not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry...scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument. (Gray 1736, p. 128).

The question now becomes: can claims such as these be understood to constitute cases of acquaintance with God? I think the answer is ‘yes’ since we can successfully apply the hermeneutic above. Shaftesbury writes that a sublime experience of “wildness” raises our thoughts “in admiration of divine wisdom” (Kirwan 2005, p. 27). In this case there is no talk of *inferring* God’s wisdom from the experience. One does not have a sublime experience and then consciously deduce the theistic doctrine ‘God is wise’ from that experience. Rather, Shaftesbury (if Kirwan’s paraphrase is correct) talks about having his thoughts raised in admiration of divine wisdom. One interpretation of ‘raised’ here is that the subject of the experience is passive. The sublime experience brings about the belief in the subject, without his engaging in any inferential reasoning process. This is consistent with acquaintance: the fact ((a) of acquaintance) that *God is wise* is not inferred but given to the subject in experience ((b) of acquaintance).

Moreover, consider Gray’s claim. Gray writes that a sublime experience would ‘awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument’ (Gray 1736, p. 128). Gray clearly thinks that sublime experiences are capable of bringing about a belief in the existence of God. This ‘bringing about a belief’ in someone where the belief was not present before is not due, it seems, to a process of rational deliberation; rather Gray’s claim is that simply having the experience will bring the belief about in the atheist. Hence Gray claims that there is no need for ‘other argument.’ One plausible understanding of what Gray means is that no reasoning process, is needed to convince someone that God exists after one has a sublime experience; the experience itself will suffice. Consequently, one might understand Gray to be suggesting that the fact that God exists is immediately given to the atheist in experience. It seems, therefore, as though Shaftesbury and Gray’s experiences can both be described as acquaintance with a fact.

Before I consider some objections to my account that arise from conditions (iii) and (iv) below there is one problem that should be addressed immediately. Take Gray’s claim, ‘not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry...scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument’ (Gray 1736, p. 128). If sensing God in this way necessarily requires the ‘disposition reliably to respond differentially’ on the part of the subject then one might argue that it is impossible for an atheist, who lacks this disposition, to perceive God through a sublime experience and thus convert. So, one might argue, on the acquaintance model, conversational theistic sublime experiences are impossible.

In reply, I think that there are three possible responses. Either the atheist has over time developed, perhaps non-consciously, the disposition to perceive God in this way or the atheist had this disposition all along that was only triggered during a theistic sublime experience, or God miraculously gives the atheist the disposition to

perceive God in this way. Any of these responses seems plausible. I will not argue in favour of one particular response here.

## Objections

The objections that I want to consider can be directed at either conditions (iii) or (iv). First, I will consider objections that argue that condition (iii) is not satisfied by a theistic sublime experience. That is, one might argue that the world is not a certain way so as to allow perception of the fact that God is wise relative to some sense (perceptual faculty). There are two ways that I can think of to arguing for this point. I will consider each one in turn. First, one might argue that since God does not exist then the world is not the right sort of way for someone to make the perceptual judgment that God is wise. This is a plausible response, however, I will not consider it any further here. This is because I do not understand the premise ‘God does not exist’ to be uncontroversially true and establishing its truth is beyond the bounds of this paper.

Second, however, there is a subtler way to argue that the world, in general, is not the right sort of way to support perception of God via a sublime experience. One might object, for example, that sublime experiences do not have a distinctive enough appearance relative to the properties perceived during a theistic sublime experience. One might show this by pointing out that there is an important disanalogy between the Mary case or the handwriting case and theistic sublime experience. In the case of Jack perceiving Mary’s distress Jack could see Mary’s facial features. Most would agree that facial features are a good indication of someone’s emotional state and that Mary’s facial features are distinctive enough for one to perceive a specific emotional state. Likewise, in the case where  $S_2$  perceives that  $S_1$  is distressed by perceiving a shopping list written by  $S_1$  one may argue that there are features distinctive enough for  $S_1$  to perceive that  $S_2$  is distressed. A particular stroke, for example, had been written quickly indicating that the writer was frantic. One might argue, however, that the features involved in a sublime experience are not distinctive enough to warrant theistic perception. That is, our experience of objects with ‘extreme properties’ has no features distinctive enough to allow perception of a fact about God.

In response, this objection seems to beg the question: in virtue of what do we rule out the world’s being distinctive enough to allow theistic perception? One might respond by arguing in, for example, one of the following three ways.<sup>14</sup> First, one might think that God does not exist and, therefore, it’s not possible for God to have made the world in such a way so as to enable us to perceive him upon having a sublime experience. Second, one might think that it is not possible for God to actualize a world in which he can be perceived through natural phenomena. Third, one may respond, by arguing that reasons can be given to think that God has not made the world distinctive enough so as to make the perceptual judgment that he is F from the way it appears.

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<sup>14</sup> There may be other ways that I am not aware of.



I will reply to each of these responses, spending more time on the third response. Regarding the first response, I refer one to the point I made in the argument above; I am not able to address questions of God's existence here. Regarding the second response, my reply is that I cannot see a good reason why it would be impossible for God to actualize a world in which he can be perceived through natural phenomena. I have given a case (the handwriting example) where facts about an agent are perceived through another object. If one accepts that it is possible to perceive a fact about another agent through another object then one should accept that it's possible that a fact about God (an agent) can be perceived through another object (or, more precisely, upon having a sublime experience). Perhaps my interlocutor thinks that it is something about *this* particular agent (i.e., God) that makes perception of Him through another object impossible. I especially invite responses along these lines.

Regarding the third response I must first note that there may be reasons to think that God has not made the world distinctive enough so as to make the perceptual judgment that he is F from the way it appears, but, until those reasons are given the burden still lies with my interlocutor. I welcome those reasons. I won't, however, leave the argument there. There is one initial suggestion that one may cite to doubt that God has made it the case that facts about him can be perceived upon having a sublime experience.<sup>15</sup> One may point out that the epiphanic belief content 'god is F' of one subject's theistic sublime experience may refer to, say, the Judeo-Christian god. While the epiphanic belief content 'god is F' of some other subject's theistic sublime experience may not refer to a fact about the Judeo-Christian god but, say, Brahma. That is, the epiphanic belief content of one subject's theistic sublime experience may be 'Yahweh is wise' while the other's is 'Brahma is wise'. Consequently, my interlocutor may argue that this provides a reason for us to think that God (say, the Judeo-Christian god) has not made the world distinctive enough so as to make the perceptual judgment that *He* (the Judeo-Christian god) is F from the way it appears (and vice versa).

There are various responses that one can give to this objection. For the sake of brevity, I will only consider one here. Put simply one can reply by agreeing that the experience itself is not sufficient for perception that 'Brahma is wise' or that 'Yahweh is wise.' The reason being is that it does not seem that cases of theistic sublime experiences, as I've described them, are distinctive enough for us to be able to distinguish which believer's concept of God is privileged by the experience at hand.<sup>16</sup> Rather, in both cases, one might argue that the subject's background beliefs have leaked into (cf. Alston 1991, p. 259) her perceptual judgment 'god is wise.' This is not to say, however, that one is not acquainted with a fact about god. Rather, in these cases the subject's background beliefs inform her judgement about the nature of the god that she is perceiving. But this is rather unsurprising. As Alston notes upon his having a religious experience more generally,

[w]hen I take *God* to be present to me I will, if I am a Christian, but not if I am a Moslem or a Hindu, most likely take it that *He who became man in the*

<sup>15</sup> I focus on this reason because it is (so it seems to me) the strongest.

<sup>16</sup> My thanks goes to David E. Schrader for pointing this out.



*person of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins* is present to me. Indeed, it is generally true we make use of what we believe about perceived objects when we perceptually identify them (Alston 1991, p. 258).

I take this to be true in cases of theistic sublime experiences specifically.

Several problems arise when taking this strategy. For example, one may question whether or not is one justified or rational in holding that it is their particular god that has made the world distinctive enough to allow the perceptual judgment that ‘god is F’ from the way it appears given this peer disagreement? Unfortunately, these concerns go beyond the bounds of this paper but have been addressed elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> I think that I’ve said enough with regards to objections concerning (iii). In consequence, I will now move onto the second group of possible objections to the acquaintance model that concern (iv). That is, one might argue the subject does not have a disposition reliably to respond to sublime experiences that enables acquaintance with facts about God.

One might argue this either by arguing that there is no disposition that enables one to perceive facts about God upon having a sublime experience or by arguing that this disposition is unreliable. I will not respond to the argument that there is no disposition that enables one to perceive facts about God upon having a sublime experience. I merely state that it seems like there is one since people do seem to perceive facts (or purported facts) about God upon having a sublime experience.

My interlocutor might, however, take their lead from contemporary discussions on the epistemology of religious beliefs and argue that since there is a naturalistic explanation for this theistic perception that involves mechanisms that are wholly describable in terms of evolutionary psychology and since we can show that these mechanisms are unreliable there are no grounds for understanding theistic sublime experiences as cases of genuine theistic perceptual belief.

For example, take Daniel Dennett. Dennett thinks that the mechanism that produces religious belief is a ‘kind of fiction-generating contraption’ (Dennett 2006, p. 184). That is, Dennett thinks that there is a mechanism that produces religious beliefs but this mechanism produces false beliefs. Dennett argues that this mechanism produces a false belief in God because it is a spandrel (a by-product of a certain cognitive faculty that evolved for different purposes (cf. Evans 2012, 40)) called the ‘hypersensitive agency detection device’ (HADD). The HADD is a mental device designed to detect when an object has intentions. The inveterate tendency to see natural objects as intentional is thought to have developed to aid survival. For example, survival is more likely if one detects a predator upon seeing a tree branch (a false belief) rather than failing to see a predator when one should (e.g., by thinking that a snake is a tree branch). Dennett argues that belief in God is the by-product of this mechanism. In other words, since we have an inbuilt tendency to attribute intentions to objects in nature and interpret certain natural patterns and events as directed by an agent, if no agent can be found a supernatural agent is invoked. Belief in this supernatural agent is merely, however, the result of a mental device designed for other purposes and, as such, not reliably produced.

<sup>17</sup> Both Alston (1991) and Plantinga (2000) address this issue at great length.

Before I respond it should be noted that the postulation that there is a mental device that gives one belief in God is not, by itself, destructive to the theist's position. For if one believes that God exists then one might also expect that God endowed humans with a certain mechanism, perceptive cognitive faculty, contraption or whatever for making them “‘hard-wired” to be religious’ (Evans 2012, p. 39) and thus enabling them to perceive him. In fact, a cognitive faculty that produces belief in God is in keeping with traditional theology and contemporary accounts of ‘reformed epistemology’ (Plantinga 2000). The *sensus divinitatis*, postulated by reformed epistemology, is translated literally as ‘a sense of the divine.’ Calvin writes, ‘[t]here is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy’ (Calvin 1955, p. 44). This is not a post hoc suggestion to account for current findings in cognitive studies but an established principle of theology.

The problem, then, is not that there is a mechanism. Rather, the problem is that this mechanism is supposedly a spandrel and is therefore an *unreliable* belief-forming mechanism. This argument, however, is problematic. If the objector thinks that every spandrel is unreliable and thinks that our ability to do high-level mathematics, for example, is the result of a cognitive faculty designed for other purposes (as may be conjectured) then he or she is committed to the absurd claim that high-level mathematics is also unreliable. Consequently, merely saying some cognitive mechanism is a spandrel should not discount its reliability. Rather, some further argument is needed to show that the belief-forming mechanism that produces belief in God, or enables us to do high-level mathematics for that matter, should be counted among the spandrels that are unreliable/reliable.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that when one has a theistic sublime experience one can be said to be *acquainted* with a fact about God upon having that experience. I have not attempted to argue that my model is the right model nor have I attempted to argue that my model is more plausible than the inference model. I have merely attempted to demonstrate that my model is a candidate explanation for what happens when one has a theistic sublime experience. If my model is coherent, however, it has an important ramification. The ramification is that provided there are no significant defeaters for the acquaintance model and since beliefs formed by acquaintance can count as *prima facie* justified then one can be *prima facie* justified in believing that, for example, God is wise upon having a sublime experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Evans (2012) also makes a similar argument. I should note, however, that I am not claiming that the belief-forming mechanism that forms belief in God is, in fact, a spandrel; it might not be. Simply put, my argument is that even if the cognitive faculty that produces belief in God is a spandrel that does not sanction the conclusion that it is unreliable. I thank Daniel Hill for alerting me to this point.

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